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Exploring the Feasibility of School – Based Curriculum Development in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper explores the feasibility and desirability of school-based curriculum development in Zimbabwe. Data was gathered from interviews with teachers, school heads and parents were used in this study. The sample constituted schools from the dominant educational contexts in Zimbabwe namely urban day and boarding schools, rural day schools, farm and resettlement schools, the differentiated contextual backgrounds of Zimbabwean schools, and different levels of educational resources that the schools have, a curriculum that is context differentiated will be more desirable than the present centrally – based one. However, such factors, as expertise in curriculum development among stakeholders and availability of resources, are bound to militate against this.

Keywords: Curriculum, School – Based Curriculum Development, Centrally – Based Curriculum Development

Introduction

Curriculum planning is a problematic enterprise to carry out. It entails making fundamental decisions about what is deemed worthwhile knowledge at any given time so as to meet the societal needs and interests. Two major paradigms namely the Centrally Designed Curriculum Development approach, A centralized form of curriculum making process and the School – Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) which assumes a decentralized curriculum making process are employed in curriculum development. The former, is employed in the development of the school curriculum in Zimbabwe. The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU), a department in the ministry of Education, Art, Sport and culture is responsible for planning and developing curricula for the Zimbabwe school system. Critics of the school curriculum have raised concerns about the effectiveness of a curriculum planned the way in providing worthwhile knowledge. The basic tenet of this approach is that it is centre-periphery. Decisions are made at some distant centre elsewhere and they are cascaded down to the user system at the periphery. Thus, the chances of the user system at furthest end receiving a watered down version of the originally documented curriculum cannot be ruled out. More often than not, a large gap is experienced between the

planned curriculum and the transacted curriculum. This has resulted in what Hoyle (1978) terms “tissue rejection”.

With this backdrop of problems bedevilling the current approach to curriculum planning, it becomes imperative for Zimbabwe to consider an alternative approach, School – Based Curriculum Development.

Methodology

Data was gathered through interviews with teachers and School Development Association members in all the categories of Zimbabwean schools; namely rural and urban day schools, government, church owned boarding schools, and schools on farms and mines. Lecturers in teacher Education colleges were also interviewed. Document analyses of teacher time- tables and teacher education syllabuses were carried out. Observation of school activities was done. The resources in school libraries, subject areas and departments were assessed.

Curriculum Development in Zimbabwe

The school Curriculum in Zimbabwe is planned at the CDU. Teacher representation is through members of various subject panels and Staff associations such as ZIMTA. A proto-type curriculum is developed after a situational analysis to assess the national needs and interests has been carried out. After this stage, a blueprint is designed followed by materials development. Syllabuses, teachers’ guides, and pupils’ textbooks are designed in tandem with the curriculum. Subject teams made up of professionally trained personnel in the fields of research, writing and evaluation drawn from universities, teacher Education colleges, schools, and other institutions are involved in materials development. The activity of materials development also encompasses pilot testing of materials within a 50 kilometre radius of Harare (The Curriculum Development Plan, 1987; Gatawa, 1990). Although this may sound a plausible way of involving teacher participation at the developmental stage, a closer analysis of this process of curriculum development would raise such questions as: is the representation meaningful considering the total number of teachers who would execute the developed curriculum? Will teachers be fully conversant with a curriculum when they did not participate in its formation?

School-Based Curriculum Development; A Conceptual Framework

School- based curriculum development, with its attendant jargon of decentralization, acquired widespread international currency since the 1970. It is important to point out that to date the political and economic vagaries; most countries have reverted to the centralized system of curriculum development. In order to understand the conceptual framework of SBCD, it is imperative to define it. Skilbeck, one major advocate of SBCD in Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins (1998) clearly notes that the term gives rise to many misconceptions as if what is being proposed is that a school becomes a miniature materials development and evaluation centre. It does not suggest that all aspects of the curriculum will be developed in the school. It has to be borne in mind that the school is more than the teachers who work in it. It operates in the context of the society, national and international community and the curriculum is wider and deeper than syllabuses and lessons plans. Thus, School-based curriculum development is not reducible to individual teachers developing and implementing a curriculum of their own devising.

Skilbeck in Hargreaves, et al. (1998, p. 129) views SBCD in two ways.

At one level of analysis, SBCD encompasses numerous diverse and often mundane activities undertaken by the schools, teachers and students as they go about their normal business of teaching and learning regardless of ultimate authority for fundamental decisions about the overall shape and content of the curriculum.

In this conception, SBCD becomes part of the teaching profession. At a more systematic level, Skilbeck explains:

SBCD Derives from a conception of the school as both locus and prime agent in a complex set of processes ranging from national or international educational policies to the distribution through the entire educational system of responsibility for decisions about what is to be taught, by whom and with what means...While broad goals and frameworks of the subject matter may be and usually are nationally determined; the school has a definite responsibility of transforming these generalities into actual curricula.

This view of SBCD suggests that the school is not merely a delivery agency of curricula developed elsewhere neither does it individually determine the curriculum but being part of a wider context, the curriculum it develops is within the national, state, or regional framework. Skilbeck further asserts that the definition of SBCD is impoverished unless the wider views of education, the role of teachers, schools, and communities are taken aboard. It is this conception of SBCD that this discussion will refer to with reference to Zimbabwe.

SBCD is located in the discourse of curriculum change and innovation. Curriculum change and innovation is subsystem of curriculum theory.

Rationale for SBCD in Zimbabwe

As already eluded to in this discussion the centralised nature of curriculum development in Zimbabwe, it presents the user system with problems of curriculum implementation. The fact that the pilot testing of developed curricula is done within a 50 km radius of Harare, where the CDU is located implies that the pilot testing is no thorough, a pertinent question to address, therefore, is: do the conditions in the 50km radius of Harare approximate those obtaining in other contexts that the curriculum would be implemented? The 'fit all sizes' kind of curriculum that the CDU develops is expected to be used in urban day schools, rural day schools, government urban boarding schools, mission boarding schools private schools, schools on mining and farming communities, and satellite schools in resettlement areas which have composite classes. The degree of adoption and adaptation of such curricula certainly varies with the situation obtaining within a given context consequently; vast variations between the planned and the actual curriculum occur ideally, a credible pilot testing should cut across the whole spectrum of school types and contexts in Zimbabwe. In that respect, SBCD finds its legitimacy in the flaws that the centrally based approach presents in Zimbabwe.

Referring to curriculum innovation projects after independence in Africa and particularly in Zimbabwe, Nkomo (1995; 127) laments that “at least 70% of educational innovations die before they achieve their stated purpose”; yet massive investments would have been made in those projects. One major reason for the failure of educational innovations, according to Mavhunga Phiri (23 note), *“is the marginalisation or limited involvement of the teacher in curriculum development, particularly at the planning stage”*. Centrally designed curricula deskilled teachers. To that end, SBCD would enable teachers to participate in development of a curriculum whose rationale and philosophical underpinnings they understand. Teachers would imbibe the spirit of ownership of the curriculum and would be more likely willing to see its successful implementation.

Marsh (1990, p. 3) contends that “School-based curriculum development is essentially a teacher-initiated grassroots phenomenon...” It is in line with what Stenhouse (197) calls “the teacher as a researcher”. Encouraging teachers, to take active participation in curriculum development, echoes the conviction that changes made within the school system are a necessary part of strategies aimed at enhancing the quality and longevity, and relevance of educational innovations.

Is SBCD Feasible in Zimbabwe?

The worthiness of any curriculum is judged against the one before it. In exploring the feasibility of SBCD in Zimbabwe, it is important to consider the historical antecedence of the present day curriculum. The centralized system of curriculum planning was bequeathed to the present by the colonial system. The colonial curriculum was embedded in the dual philosophy of education. White children had a curriculum different from that of African children which was deliberately meant to be watered down and inferior. This was done to keep Africans out of competition with whites. Zvobgo (1997, p. 186) commented that *“the colonial curriculum perpetuated race, class, gender and ethnic divisions and emphasized separateness rather than the common citizenship”*. Consequently, the f2 curriculum, a practically oriented curriculum which was ecological in nature meant for African children, was given a colonial connotation. It was viewed as a curriculum for second class citizens, even though today it is being emphasized in the school system under the banner of ‘New Vocationalism’.

The general sentiments expressed by interviewed teachers were that given the background of curriculum planning that the country has, trenchant criticism may arise in that SBCD may evoke memories of a segregated curriculum of the colonial era. It may be viewed as a resurgence of the emphasis of class and ethnic divisions and a negation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal access to the curriculum that the government wants to perpetuate. Thus, the whole idea of SBCD may be very difficult to sell to some quarters of the user system.

Implementation of centrally developed curricular in Zimbabwe has been hampered by variables peculiar to contextual locations of schools. Urban schools, for example, have better infrastructure and resource materials as compared to rural schools or newly established schools in resettled farming communities. Some schools in the resettlement areas do not even have

conventional classrooms and for some, the classes are composite. To that end, SBCD becomes desirable so that there is isomorphism between the curriculum and the context in which it will operate.

Whereas it may be logical to have SBCD to cater for the differences in context problems, that stem from the variance in the curricula if the pupils change contexts. Also, it is doubtful if those communities are academically empowered enough to articulate the rigours of curriculum development. Even if they are, taking into cognisance the nature of their work which is mainly arduous, by the end of the day, it is highly unlikely that they will have time and energy to spare for the business of curriculum development, an enterprise that they have always known is handled by experts elsewhere.

One major advantage of centrally developed curricula is that the government has the capacity to mobilise resources. One of the fears expressed by interviewed school heads is resource mobilization for curricula developed at school level. Most of the schools have no access to external sources of funding and the communities in which they are struggling to finance some small school projects. SBCD demands a large resource base and may not be easy to carry out in some schools.

It is also important to consider the nature of the teachers in the Zimbabwe school system and their capacity to handle school based curriculum development. Zimbabwe has an eclectic mixture of teacher academic and professional qualifications. Gatawa (1990) describes it as “a mixed-bag of qualifications”. The academic qualifications range from standard six, ordinary level, advanced level, bachelors, honours, and masters degrees; Professional qualifications include: certificate in education, diploma, graduate certificate in education, graduate diploma in education, and master’s in education. Some teachers in the schools do not have professional qualifications. The way these teachers understand curriculum issues is certainly different.

A document analysis of syllabuses from four teacher education colleges revealed that curriculum development was not given emphasis over the years. Concentration was on the subject areas, professional issues, teaching practice and theory of education. This confirms the observation made by Zais (1976) that teachers simply are not oriented towards developing the new curricula. To that end, teachers do not view curriculum development as their prime responsibility. In Zimbabwe, therefore, the generality of the teacher populace in the school system has no knowledge of curriculum development save for the few who have taken up courses in curriculum theory at degree level. Therefore, the ability of most teachers to develop a curriculum at school level becomes questionable.

No matter how much willing a teacher in Zimbabwe may be to participate in curriculum development, the nature of his work militates against this. Conditions of work in most Zimbabwean schools are often not conducive for teachers to play a meaningful role in curriculum development. Teachers have to grapple with heavy teaching loads averaging 36 periods per week in the secondary school and 11 subjects to teach in the primary school. All these subjects require

a lot of preparation through scheming and planning. Furthermore, Zimbabwean teachers handle very large classes averaging 40 to 50 pupils per class in the urban areas and around 30 to 40. As for the newly established schools in the resettlement areas, the number of pupils can be as few as 10 per class but the classes are composite. In recent study by Nyoni and Nyoni (2011), composite classes can have up to three grades, for example, Grade 3, 4 and 5. Although the numbers per class may be small, the teacher still has a lot of work scheming and planning to do. Each of these pupils requires different cognitive orientation and different emotions from the same teacher.

Teacher remuneration in Zimbabwe is dismal. Teachers who were interviewed expressed the sentiments that they would rather be involved in income generation projects to supplement their meagre income. The net effect is that a teacher becomes “burnt out”. Such conditions leave very little time for the teacher to get involved in curriculum development work.

The teaching profession in Africa recruits people of mediocre ability and literature on curriculum change and innovation brand teachers as conservative (Bishop, 1986; Harris, 1975). This view was substantiated by comments made by some interviewed teachers such as: *“what is wrong with the approach that is currently in use? You want us to start learning new things now and how many jobs are we employed to do, Curriculum planning is outside our job description. Ours is mainly to teach. Teachers view change as threatening as it tends to deskill them and force them to adopt new ways of going about their routine work. This assertion was confirmed by teachers’ sentiments that curriculum development is not their responsibility. They are strategically placed in the classroom to teach and not to construct a curriculum. If they are too getting involved in it, they would need reorientation.*

Recommendations

If teachers, pupils and the community are to play a meaningful role in curriculum development, workshops at cluster level, provincial and national level should be mounted. Also, teachers can be encouraged to undergo in-service programs so that they are acquainted with the knowledge of curriculum development. Reduction of teacher workload would go a long way in creating time for curriculum development. This can take the form of employment of staff to handle co-curricular activities such as sporting activities and clubs. Reducing teacher pupil ratio from 1-50 to 1-25 would allow teachers time to do other activities. Most of their time is spent marking large piles of pupils work. More resource materials apart from the basic textbooks that pupils use should be availed in the school libraries. In cases where there are no school libraries, teacher resource centres at cluster, national, provincial levels should be set up. Such centres should be manned by specialist curriculum planners who will guide curriculum development work. The area of teacher attitude has to be addressed. There is need to instil in teachers the zeal for research. The concept of “teacher as a researcher” propounded by Stenhouse (1975) should be popularised so that SBCD is viewed along the same lines. The curricula in teacher Education colleges should emphasize the curriculum development. This move has already been embarked on by Teacher Education colleges in Zimbabwe.

The school communities should be encouraged to participate in school activities that go beyond financing projects. Of-late concentration of parents has been more of paying school levies for infrastructural development of schools. There is need for them to take active participation in planning what their children learn.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's eclectic mixture of teacher qualifications and varied educational contexts make SBCD a desirable optional approach to curriculum development. However at present, there are many variables that intervene in the use of the approach to curriculum development such as level of resources in the schools, teacher preparedness, teacher attitude, conditions of work, and the attitude of the community to school activities.

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